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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 003612

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV GG RS
SUBJECT: RUSSIA'S APPOINTED AMBASSADOR ON ABKHAZIA

REF: TBILISI 2271

Classified By: Pol MinCouns Alice G. Wells for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Newly appointed Ambassador to Abkhazia Semyon Grigoriev assured us December 11 that Russia would not welcome or condone any Abkhaz effort to redraw boundaries along the Enguri river. In order to improve border security, Russia and Abkhazia planned to sign an agreement on joint border forces. However, he said Russia had no way of stopping the border mining activities. Stressing that Russia's main message to Abkhazia was that only a multinational state was sustainable, he posited that the joint use of the Enguri power station could serve as a confidence-building measure between Georgia and Abkhazia. Grigoriev maintained that, following reconstruction efforts, Abkhazia had the potential to be an economically viable state, although the government, police, and court system was corrupt. Grigoriev said he would present his credentials on December 16, and would take up his position as ambassador in late February or early March. Grigoriev estimated that the fully staffed embassy would comprise 10 diplomats plus an additional 10-15 administrative staff. End Summary.

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Border dispute and military presence
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¶2. (C) MFA 4th CIS Deputy Director and appointed Ambassador to Abkhazia Semyon Grigoriev told us December 11 that Russia supported Soviet-era administrative border divisions, and would not welcome or condone any Abkhaz effort to redraw boundaries along the Enguri river. On this, Grigoriev asserted, there was "absolutely no ambiguity." The border should remain the same as "the one on the maps." Grigoriev noted that in August, Abkhaz troops had surrendered occupied Georgian territory on Russia's insistence.

¶3. (C) In response to our concerns over reports of deteriorating security and provocative acts by Abkhaz forces (reftel), Grigoriev acknowledged that the situation in Abkhazia, while better than in South Ossetia, remained "tense." While Russian forces still maintained several block posts, they no longer controlled the border itself. In order to improve the situation on the border, Russia and Abkhazia planned to sign an agreement on joint border forces, similar to what Russia had done with Armenia -- Russia would supply officers and Abkhazia the soldiers for a protection system based on Russian standards. Grigoriev acknowledged that it was also necessary to create a coordination mechanism with the UN and EU monitors. While the agenda for the December 17 Geneva talks included the discussion of an incident prevention mechanism with the UN and EU, Grigoriev said there were no plans to discuss a coordination mechanism for border protection at that venue. Grigoriev confirmed the establishment of a Russian military base in Gudauta, but noted that new Russian military reforms would result in less than full brigade strength -- 3,000 soldiers, vice 3,800. We expressed concern over the proposed establishment of joint

Russian-Abkhaz border forces, and underscored that a continued Russian brigade-strength troop presence in Abkhazia would create problems within the CFE process.

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Confidence-building measures
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¶4. (C) Grigoriev posited that the operation of the Enguri power station could serve as a confidence-building measure (CBM) between Georgia and Abkhazia, given the previous understanding of joint use remained in force. He said the continued use of the power station according to extant agreements made common sense, as it was "based on common interests."

¶5. (C) Grigoriev admitted that Russia had not developed any other CBMs so far, and lamented that there was no Georgia-Abkhazia dialogue to do so, either. Responding to our comment that the Geneva process constituted such a dialogue, Grigoriev said he doubted Russia would insist on stopping the process "very soon," but called the transfer of discussions into a UN framework a logical step, as the Geneva process had only arisen out of the ceasefire agreement.

¶6. (C) We pressed Grigoriev on the need for more CBMs and opportunities to keep the conflict parties talking, including by continuing the Geneva process. We called on Russia to use its influence to secure the renewal of the UNOMIG mandate in a way that did not recognize any loss of Georgia's territorial integrity, and enable the return of IPDs to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.



¶7. (C) Grigoriev stated that Russia's main message to Abkhazia was that only a multinational state that included Georgian and other populations was a sustainable state. This involved conforming Abkhazia's legislation to international conventions on the protection of minorities, refugees, and human rights. Grigoriev reported that Abkhaz "president" Bagapsh and "foreign minister" Shamba had both expressed to him their willingness to talk to Georgia "on an equal basis." However, they were not willing to talk to the present leadership of Georgia. Grigoriev considered Vashadze a positive choice for foreign minister, and said Abkhazia respected Georgia's former Ambassador to the UN, Irakli Alasania.

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Violence
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¶8. (C) Grigoriev sympathized with, but offered little help for our concerns about the border mining and other incidences of violence near the administrative border. Calling the mining the result of the "absolute lack of confidence" of Abkhaz authorities in the GOG, he said Russia had no way of stopping that activity. Grigoriev suggested only a change of the atmosphere in relations could promise relief.

¶9. (C) Grigoriev had not heard reports about tanks stopping within several hundred meters of a UN station, or helicopter overflights, but put that down to a "presentation of power" by Abkhaz forces. He agreed on the need to reduce the potential for provocation. We underscored that security issues were the most immediate reason for our visit, and asked Grigoriev to relay our concern that Abkhaz actions could provoke a new conflict.

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Viability as a state
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¶10. (C) Grigoriev maintained that, following reconstruction efforts, Abkhazia had the potential to be an economically

viable state. He noted the resort conditions, agricultural production, and existence of coal and electricity industries as foundations of an independent economy, and pointed to Russian investment and military presence as additional factors. While preparations for the Sochi Olympic Games made up another revenue stream, Grigoriev cautioned that the uncontrolled exploitation of Abkhaz resources by eager Russian construction companies could devastate the ecology, which was important for the resort tourism sector.

¶11. (C) Calling Abkhazia's government, police, and court system "capable," Grigoriev questioned its effectiveness due to corruption and infiltration by criminal elements. However, this compared favorably with South Ossetia, which he claimed four months after the conflict had yet to form a working government.

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Credentials
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¶12. (C) Grigoriev told us he would only stay briefly in Abkhazia to present his credentials to Abkhaz "president" Bagapsh December 16, and expected to take up his position only in late February or early March. The reasons for this delay were that the bureaucratic procedures to create a new embassy had still not been completed, and the interim premises of the embassy -- an old sanatorium -- needed repair. Grigoriev estimated that the fully staffed embassy would comprise 10 diplomats plus an additional 10-15 administrative staff.

¶13. (C) Grigoriev noted that the MFA was in the process of identifying a building to house Abkhazia's embassy in Moscow. On December 10, the appointed Ambassador of the Republic of Abkhazia to the Russian Federation, Igor Akhba, presented DFM Grigory Karasin copies of his credentials.

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Comment
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¶14. (C) While not very enthusiastic about his new appointment, Grigoriev is a pragmatic and understanding interlocutor. Given the MFA's marginalized status on policymaking toward the conflict republics, Grigoriev's ability to influence future Russian actions will be limited.
RUBIN